DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 052 CE 055 149

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TITLE Illiteracy in Industrialized Countries: Realities and Myths. Literacy Lessons.
INSTITUTION International Bureau of Education, Geneva (Switzerland).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.; For other "Literacy Lessons" booklets, see CE 055 128-167. Also available in French.
AVAILABLE FROM International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; *Developed Nations; Dropouts; *Economically Disadvantaged; Educational History; Educationally Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Government School Relationship; *Illiteracy; Literacy; *Literacy Education; Minority Groups; Unemployment
IDENTIFIERS International Literacy Year 1990

ABSTRACT

When considering illiteracy in industrialized countries, one should consider the following: (1) schools historically were not set up to transmit literacy skills, as evidenced by the fact that the geography and chronology of literacy are much less linked to the establishment of formal schooling than to the history of social development; (2) schools are not well equipped to teach basic skills because only children whose families provide the support and tuition they do not obtain in school can hope to progress at a normal rate, and remedial education is the kind of instruction most frequently hit by cuts in spending; (3) illiteracy does not cause poverty but illiteracy is highest among school leavers, minority groups, the long-term unemployed, and severely disadvantaged populations; (4) many illiterate people are not inarticulate or helpless, particularly those who ask for help in learning to read; (5) firm statistics on the extent of illiteracy are hard to come by and misrepresentation of the situation is often a prerequisite for meagre financial support; and (6) illiteracy is not an individual problem but a global problem with social, political, and economic dimensions. Attempts to justify education in economic or other terms can and will be countered with projections of the kinds of jobs that will be available in the 21st century for which high levels of literacy will not be necessary. However, the argument is irrefutable that self-sustaining literacy and numeracy are basic human rights that all industrialized countries can afford. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 149

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Illiteracy in industrialized countries: realities and myths

by Leslie Limage

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION

Semi- or complete illiteracy is a fact of life for sizable minorities in all industrialized countries. This has gone largely unrecognized for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these are related to misconceptions about the basic functions of schools in these societies. Other reasons for the 'invisibility' of the problem are related to the invisibility of the populations usually affected by illiteracy. Another factor which has tended to hide the issue is the ambivalence of national commitment to ensure a literate society as either a basic human right, a social obligation or a necessary prerequisite for economic and social development.

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS FOR?

Myth 1: Schools were set up to transmit literacy skills

It is usually assumed that schooling was created in industrialized countries to transmit literacy and numeracy skills to all children. A closer look at the history of formal schooling in Europe and North America by historians of education and literacy gives us another picture. It has been found, time and again, that the chronology and the geography of literacy are much less linked to the establishment of formal schooling than to the history of social development. In fact, as schools were opened up to wider groups of the population, access to reading and writing skills was more severely restricted to an elite than in the earlier schools. Initially, the most acceptable form of instruction for the masses was considered to be memorization of passages from

the Bible. Outside schools, demographers of literacy have discovered that literacy grew more rapidly under specific conditions. Long-standing urban centres were more favourable to the general expansion of literacy acquisition than were rural areas or newly-established towns and cities. Indeed, the rapidly changing urban centres of the late nineteenth century were actually unfavourable sites for the growth of literacy. Thus, schools were perceived originally as institutions for indoctrination into one's proper place in society, and as such were looked upon with skepticism by the working classes. We were a far cry in the nineteenth century from the present image of the school as the provider of potential social mobility for all. This twentieth century image of schools in both industrialized and developing countries has however proved somewhat misleading.

A close look at the history of literacy reveals another crucial issue: the relationship between learning to read and learning to write. Clearly, an individual who can only read but who cannot convey his or her own thoughts to others through writing is not only partially illiterate, but seriously disenfranchised from full participation in society. The history of writing developed essentially separately from that of reading, as did the prestige and power of the written word. In the Middle Ages, writing was a sacred act reserved for an elite. Religious manuscripts were painstakingly copied by artisans who could not necessarily read the texts which they were reproducing. Writing in general was an act intended to preserve that which was already considered sacred, as an alternative to oral memory.

Everything changes when a large part of the population is able to read and write. Each person can relate to the written word on his or her own terms rather than relying on a mediator who controls access to knowledge.

Societies have evolved since the nineteenth century and of course, the demands made on schools have undergone numerous mutations. As schools have attempted to respond to these changing demands, however, it is important to demystify the purposes of schooling. History is one tool. For schools have been asked to take on other functions beyond that of social selection for the needs of changing economies and values. The democratization of education and the notions of equal opportunity are extremely recent in the history of education. The development of some form of secondary schooling for all is almost exclusively a post Second World War affair in industrialized countries. Even so, the quality and quantity of further schooling remains highly diverse across countries.

WHAT IS GOING ON IN SCHOOLS?

Myth 2: Schools are well-equipped to teach basic skills

If to varying degrees, schools have functions other than those of forming the young to accept the values and norms of their societies, what happens inside these institutions causing considerable numbers of young people to leave them either without a school-leaving certificate of any sort and/or without the basic literacy and numeracy skills to survive and develop in the labour markets of the late twentieth century?

Numerous studies have shown that remedial education, specialized tutoring, etc. are the kinds of instruction most frequently hit by cuts in educational spending. A vicious circle sets in. A demoralized teaching profession, less and less able to cope with degenerating

working conditions and lack of prestige, reacts in a number of industrialized countries exactly like colleagues in the developing world: high rates of absenteeism; lack of preparation for the classes they teach; recourse to the most traditional teaching methods which require the least preparation and teaching efforts on their part (dictations, increased number of tests or exams); refusal to grade homework or, in extreme cases, important examinations and general professional laxity. In the final analysis, it is the pupils who suffer. Ony children who receive in their families the support and tuition which they do not obtain in school can hope to progress at a normal rate, by any definition of that term. Excessive rates of grade repetition thus reflect a school system which can no longer cope, and not deficiencies in the individual child, although it is the child who is actually sanctioned. It is really not at all surprising that the initial enthusiasm and eagerness to learn of 11–12 year olds, which any teacher has experienced as new pupils enter lower secondary school, is so easily crushed by a disaffected teaching profession and by older peers who have already been rejected by the system. *It takes so very little to destroy a child's self-esteem and his or her own confidence in the ability to learn.*

We know for the most part what fosters better reading and writing skills: constant and varied practice. Numerous studies and reports give a clear picture of what provision of a better environment would entail and the price to be paid: recruitment of competent teachers, improved working conditions in schools, innovative teaching methods, reduced class sizes and so forth. Clearly these changes require financial investment over a long period of time, as only publicly-funded education can provide. Inflamed rhetoric and endless awareness-raising about a problem without the sustained means to resolve it are only counter-productive.

But what is currently happening? In one European educational system at the elementary school level, children engage in virtually no creative or expository writing. They are drilled in dictation, rote memorization of poems, texts on history or simply set to copying a lesson on a given subject by a teacher who holds all the worthwhile knowledge on that subject. 'Real' writing skills are only sparingly introduced in upper secondary schools, with slight skirmishes into writing summaries ('resumes') or short essays by the more enlightened teachers of language and grammar at lower levels. Instruction in reading for meaning is virtuously avoided, and the skills necessary to read critically and synthetically are reserved for the minority who make it to upper secondary education.

In North America the use and abuse of standardized testing and the devastation it has wrought on the literacy skills of children continues. Although a large and vocal body of educators denounces the use of standardized testing, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, to evaluate both the learning achievement and potential of students, the practice is still overwhelming.

For economies of scale, the standardized test is on strong ground. For a valid assessment of levels of literacy skills and other qualitative performance however, it is not only useless but dangerous when used as the *only* means of evaluating an individual's potential or achievement. It is argued that the standardized test eliminates the subjectivity of the individual examiner, but it substitutes the arbitrariness of the question design and introduces the dangers of cultural bias.

Myth 3: Illiteracy causes poverty

I have described only a few practices in schools in industrialized countries which inhibit the development of self-sustaining literacy and numeracy skills. Out-of school factors play an even larger role in the perpetuation of illiteracy among a significant number of children and adults. The most well-documented factor is, of course, poverty. Much has been written about the cycle of illiterate and impoverished parents who cannot afford and are unable to assist their children.

The literacy and poverty linkage is indisputable. But it cannot assume that all impoverished are semi or completely illiterate and that illiteracy is a necessary factor of socio-economic status in industrialized countries. What we can say with some conviction, and without resort to dubious statistics, is that all forms of illiteracy are highest among:

- school leavers who have not obtained a school-leaving certificate,
- ethnic or linguistic minorities,
- the long-term unemployed and in regions with high levels of unemployment and
- those populations which are most severely disadvantaged.

Just because illiteracy is discovered among recruits for the military or the incarcerated in penal institutions or young people remanded for juvenile delinquency does not mean that these populations represented are always illiterate. Basically, the context can change the invisibility of the illiterate to a visibility which might not otherwise occur.

Myth 4: Because the illiterate is invisible, he or she is not there

In certain industrialized countries, such as France and Switzerland, the awareness of illiteracy linked with poverty has been enhanced by the efforts of a charitable body: Aide à toute détresse ATD Quart Monde. This group works with the most disinherited populations, not only in these countries but in a number of other Western European nations and North America. Their publications describe the isolation, hopelessness and sense of shame which is the daily lot of the hard-core poor. Illiteracy is only one factor in a whole range of disadvantages. In fact, these populations are rarely reached by existing forms of remediation and adult basic education in any country.

Myth 5: The illiterate is inarticulate and helpless

But the accumulation of disadvantage is not so representative of people who come forth for assistance with basic skill acquisition. In other words, when awareness-raising campaigns and the increased availability of adult basic skill training occur, as for example during the British campaign of 1975, we find that adults who do come forward for assistance are not the most marginal members of society. They are articulate, know exactly what they need to learn and why they want to acquire literacy and numeracy skills, and are actually functioning in their families, community and workplace. Indeed, the most frequently-met adult with learning needs who asks assistance has proved extremely skilful in hiding his or her difficulties.

Unfortunately, these are the citizens in industrialized societies who are least vocal on their own behalf, and

their image and needs as conveyed by the mass media and a number of well-intentioned awareness-raising efforts only further distort their plight. The press and the television package reality to invite sensationalism, and have difficulty in presenting complex situations. It is the mass media in each country which clamour for figures on the size of the problem when no reliable estimates actually exist.

Myth 6: We need firm statistics on the extent of illiteracy

Prior to the British literacy campaign of 1975, the lobbyists for 'A Right to Read' were pressed for a figure. The figure selected, 2 million adults needing assistance, was relatively meaningless but was seized upon by the press. In 1984 when the media in France were also clamouring for statistics, the interministerial group newly created to deal with illiteracy (Groupe permanent de lutte contre l'illettrisme) also offered the figure of 2 million. This number has been amended in recent years, but nonetheless it is interesting that the French chose the same figure as the British when pressed to supply some statistics in a context in which nothing was clear). Figures in the United States range from 23 million to 64 million, according to estimates and differing definitions. There are indeed numerous figures which can be advanced cautiously, depending on definitions of literacy levels and the tests used to measure them. Unfortunately, adult literacy practitioners who are committed to improving the quality and quantity of publicly-funded provisions for learners in need do not denounce the abuse of statistics. The misrepresentation of the situation is often a prerequisite for even meager financial support.

Myth 7: Illiteracy is an individual problem

The television and press also tend to present illiteracy in a highly personalized fashion: the testimonial approach, reminiscent of alcoholics anonymous or some

other similar socially-stigmatized problem. It is easier to show vignettes of individual cases of failure and shame rather than to analyze the global problem in its social, political and economic dimensions. By showing primarily individual testimonials, the image of the illiterate as responsible for his or her own failure is inadvertently reinforced. The fault is in the victim: he or she didn't try or is intrinsically incapable or unmotivated.

The image of the adult illiterate is further distorted by some well intentioned initiatives taken by private enterprise. For example, the 'Give the Gift of Literacy' programme sponsored by the book sellers of Canada and the United States invites book buyers to contribute their small change to support literacy efforts. 'Contributing is easy ... just look for the distinctive Gift of Literacy coin box. Your change can change a life.' The underlying assumption is that the illiterate is an object of charity, a welfare recipient. Private generosity can help those who cannot or will not help themselves. Once again the victim is at fault. The political agenda is clear: basic skill acquisition for all members of that society is not a *public* priority. Whatever is done should be left to philanthropy and private charities. An illusion that something is being done is easily conveyed by the media and this type of awareness-raising effort.

It is indeed of grave concern that so-called national or international literacy initiatives or campaigns generate millions of dollars for advertising and awareness-raising but negligible public funding for long-term programmes and specialized personnel.

France

France is the country which has most recently given official recognition to the existence of semi- or complete illiteracy within its native French-speaking population. For years, it was assumed that the 'problem' as such was confined to the immigrant worker population. After the events of May 1968 in France, numerous politically or charitably-motivated groups sprang up to assist immigrant workers from North Africa, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Turkey. By and large these programmes were called 'Literacy for migrant workers'. Even public funds became available. Illiteracy among native French speakers was re-discovered in two ways. First of all, the charitable body ATD Quart Monde mentioned earlier constantly drew attention to the links between poverty and illiteracy. A government-commissioned report, *Rapport Oheix contre la précarité et la pauvreté*, confirmed their experience. Secondly, growing youth unemployment and government response in the form of training schemes starkly illustrated the fact that large numbers of school-leavers lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills. Finally, in January 1984, an official report on the problem was published, entitled *Des illettrés en France*. As a result of its findings the Groupe permanent de lutte contre l'illettrisme (Standing Group to Fight Illiteracy) was created, with its secretariat in the Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment.

The notion that a significant number of native French-speakers do not possess self-sustaining literacy and numeracy skills seems inconceivable both to the general public and to decision-makers in government.

The interministerial committee thus decided to adopt a newly-coined word to refer to their illiterates: 'illettrisme'. The origin of this term is extremely interesting and sheds light on another form of misinformation which plagues literacy work in industrialized countries.

Initially, ATD Quart-Monde coined the phrase to avoid the stigma attached to the word 'illiterate'. The term 'analphabète', or illiterate, had been used so far only to refer to the plight of immigrant workers from developing countries and thus had a pejorative connotation. The insinuation is that there is a more 'noble' form of illiteracy in industrialized countries and a more 'modest' one in the developing world. ATD Quart Monde coined this new word in a well-intentioned effort to protect all the poor illiterate from further humiliation or shame.

But the issue did not stop there. Academics soon took up the discussion and so did the media. There are now numerous 'justifications' for maintaining that semi- or complete illiteracy is different in developing countries compared with France, where public education has existed for more than a century. These arguments tend to protect the schools from criticism and resolutely place the blame back on the victim. The assumption that reading and writing skills are quantities which an individual acquires in a set period of time, and then can lose betrays serious ignorance of the learning process.

The learning process of your own children will illustrate that the more you use reading and writing in your daily life, the more you master its possibilities for communication and critical thinking.

The existence of adult illiteracy in the United States has been recognized for many years to a certain extent. The publication of Carman St John Hunter and David Harman's study *Adult illiteracy in the United States* in 1979 drew serious attention to the scale of the problem. The authors came up with varying figures, involving up to a third of the population according to the definition used. Once again, the figures have primarily a shock value.

The earliest formal measures dealing with adult illiterates came about in 1962 with the Manpower Development and Training Act. All the endeavours since then, including the 1971 'National Right to Read Program', were aimed to enable adults to become more employable and responsible citizens. Adult literacy provision currently exists in four different forms. The government officially sponsors provision through Adult Basic Education and the military. It also gives direction through the Adult Literacy Initiative of 1983. Two prominent voluntary bodies, Laubach Literacy and Literacy Volunteers of America, provide the bulk of the remaining provisions. Many small-scale community programmes exist, but all these measures taken together are in no position to address the magnitude of the problem. Adult Basic Education, the largest provider of adult literacy tuition, has had federal funding but at a level that prevents its further expansion. Adults who tend to seek this type of provision are, as is found in the United Kingdom, virtually 'functional' in their daily lives but have specific learning goals for which literacy and numeracy are key tools. In sum, however, although there is enormous visible demand for adult basic skills provision, the extent of provision is seriously limited by a lack of adequate public funding.

The United Kingdom

The adult literacy campaign in the United Kingdom (April 1975 - March 1976), as an awareness-raising effort, was initially very successful in terms of the response from potential learners and tutors. Approximately 20,000 adults responded to the first phase of the campaign. Local authorities were scarcely prepared within the framework of traditional adult education institutes to cater to this new unknown client, the adult illiterate. Thus local educational authorities were called upon to undertake a major training effort simultaneous with the opening of the campaign. In spite of the relatively unfavourable economic climate, the campaign in its initial three-year period drew 155,000 adults, or approximately one thirteenth of the estimated target population, to participate in some form of literacy programme.

A mixed reaction was given to the BBC's awareness-raising television programme 'On the Move'. Its use of stereotype working-class male characters in comic situations did not always correspond to adult illiterates' images of themselves, and its over-use of publicity/commercial techniques to attract learners were not always well-received by potential clients. In any case, their illiteracy was neither a humorous nor a humiliating condition, to the extent that it was compensated for by skilful means of subterfuge or assistance by friends and family. Indeed, the BBC did respond to this criticism and altered its programming as a result of the views of adult illiterates. The central government agency, currently called the Adult Literacy and Basic Unit, has since that time managed to ensure that a high level of provision is available from virtually all local educational authorities, and constantly encourages innovative teaching methods appropriate for adults and experiments with strategies to reach the most deprived in rural areas or inner cities.

Most industrialized countries of the Mediterranean Basin have long recognized that they have not eliminated illiteracy in their population. The situation in France, however, is not dissimilar to that of certain other industrialized countries, such as Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Luxembourg or Switzerland, in which recognition of the problem is fairly limited: voluntary bodies are the major actors in these countries. The situation in the United Kingdom could be compared with that of some Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, which are steadily recognizing the problem and acting upon that recognition through public provision. Recently it seems that Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States are all tending to form new partnerships with the private sector rather than to increase public spending.

Concerns for definition, statistics and stereotypes

Across industrialized countries adult literacy practitioners are perplexed. It would appear that the interests of young people and adults with serious learning needs are frequently in conflict with those of policy planners or governments and the mass media. The partnerships with business and the media which convey the notion of literacy and education as a basic human right are rare. Literacy is either a set of skills to obtain a job or its lack is an elusive source of personal shame. In that sense, it appears urgent that public opinion in industrialized countries be made aware of the assumptions behind the messages it is receiving concerning the purposes of learning and the plight of those who do not succeed. An illusion of much activity to promote literacy may be taking the place of concrete improvements in conditions and teaching in schools

and adult basic skills provision. The partnerships which we forge need to be based on a clear understanding of common goals.

On the occasion of International Literacy Year, it is essential that attention not be distracted from the only real guarantor of education as a basic human right: high-level national commitment and funding.

Attempts to justify education in economic or other terms can and will be countered with projections of the kinds of jobs which will be available in the twenty-first century for which high levels of literacy throughout the populations of industrialized countries will simply not be necessary. The argument that self-sustaining literacy and numeracy are basic human rights which all industrialized countries can afford is, however, irrefutable.

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Leslie Limage of the International Literacy Year Secretariat of Unesco to the cause of Literacy. Ms Limage was tutor and organizer in the British literacy campaign in 1975 and has continued to develop her interest in literacy policy and practice through research, publications and teaching. She has been a consultant to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Labour Office. She is the former Associate Editor of *Prospects*, Unesco's quarterly review on education.

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Published in 1990 by Unesco: International Bureau of Education,
P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.